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KEY ROLE REPORTED IN SPYING INQUIRY

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 28 — A veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency provided critical information that enabled prosecutors to file criminal charges against Edward Lee Howard, a former C.I.A. agent who recently defected to the Soviet Union, according to a forthcoming article.

According to intelligence sources, the former official, William G. Bosch, disclosed that he met with Mr. Howard before the defector escaped Federal surveillance. Mr. Bosch also said he had learned of Mr. Howard's sale of American secrets to the K.G.B, the sources said. Mr. Bosch, the sources said, also told the Federal Bureau of Investigation that Mr. Howard had attempted to recruit him into espionage.

Mr. Bosch's involvement in the investigation and other details of the case are disclosed in an article by David Wise to be published this Sunday in The New York Times Magazine. Distribution of the magazine to dealers begins on Wednesday.

It was unclear why Mr. Bosch failed to inform law-enforcement officials of the information until he had an extensive F.B.I. interview late last year, just as Mr. Howard made his escape from his New Mexico home. Mr. Bosch, who lives in the Los Angeles area, declined to comment for the article.

Meetings Are Described

According to intelligence sources cited in the article, Mr. Bosch, who has not been charged with a crime, acknowledged that he met with Mr. Howard more than once and had known of Mr. Howard's betrayal since at least July 1985. The sources said that at one point Mr. Bosch also described Mr. Howard's plans to visit the Soviet Embassy in Mexico.

Had Mr. Bosch talked with the authorities earlier, it appeared, Mr. Howard might not have had the opportunity to flee the United States and expose additional C.I.A. secrets to Soviet agents. Intelligence sources say Mr. Howard may have severely compromised C.I.A. operations in the Soviet Union.

According to the article, the F.B.I. tracked down Mr. Bosch last year to South Padre Island, Tex., through telephone records; Mr. Howard had been in contact with Mr. Bosch for some time. Extensive interviews with Mr. Bosch produced sufficient evidence to allow the F.B.I. to file a criminal complaint against Mr. Howard.

Mr. Howard, who had been chosen for posting as a clandestine C.I.A. officer in Moscow, was dismissed from the C.I.A. in 1983 after he failed polygraph, or lie-detector, examinations about use of illegal drugs, officials said. The tests also disclosed an incident of petty theft.

Law-enforcement officials say the dismissal embittered Mr. Howard, who went to work for the State Legislature in New Mexico as an economics analyst. In the fall of 1984, the article said, Mr. Howard met with Soviet agents in Austria and sold them highly classified information about American intelligence operations in Moscow.

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